The Unfinished Revolution in Egypt
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ALEX SERAFIMOV, MAR 3 2013

The Unfinished Revolution in Egypt: Will Democracy Alone Satisfy the Arab Spring?

Introduction

Western triumphalism had pronounced the death of the Arab “street”. It followed the ideas that the Arab World is not ready for democracy and that “the West must hold open the door” for any change to be possible.[1] However, the spontaneous revolutions and uprisings in the region, and Egypt’s first free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections, have deeply shaken these conceptions.

Using the Egyptian Revolution as our case study, we see that the narrative created in the Western media is one-sided. Focusing solely on the desire for democracy in a narrow electoral and procedural sense, this narrative obscures the deeper causes and demands of these movements. It reduces them to “pro-democracy protests”. The desire for democracy in a wider sense, as the antithesis of the strongman dictatorships of the near past, forms an important part of these movements. Yet, as with most uprisings and eruptions of mass action, deeper, often long-term socio-economic grievances form their main driving forces. In Egypt, these are stark; worsening living standards, unemployment, pervasive and deepening poverty, lack of opportunity and state abuse. These form the backbone of the Egyptian Revolution and colour its anti-neoliberal sentiment.

The legitimate demands for economic reform and social justice face many obstacles, however. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood, the main beneficiary of the elections, and its president Mohamed Morsi have taken a neoliberal stance on Egypt’s future, as has the still influential armed forces. Furthermore, progressive parties face unequal obstacles in organising and fared badly in elections, even though, as will be argued, they most accurately portray the culmination of demands put forward in the Egyptian Revolution. Finally, the likes of the G8 nations, international financial institutions and dozens of Western commentators have recommended further doses of marketisation for the Egyptian economy, despite such policies being at the heart of the causes for revolt. This gives the impression that the chance of a truly progressive programme of economic reform appears unlikely, thus not satisfying the revolution’s demands for social justice.

Therefore, this study will answer the question whether the introduction of democracy alone can in itself tackle the causes and demands of the revolution. For this task, this study will be structured into two overarching sections. The first will examine Egypt’s recent economic history and pose a counter-narrative showing that neoliberal policies were central in causing the revolution, followed by an outline of the economic demands being put forward by the Egyptian people. The second section will critically examine the theoretical debate around the link between democracy, economic equality and wealth redistribution, before analysing the issues of participation in democracy, the inadequacy of “national” democracy and Egyptian political realities today. Finally the study will offer a unique analysis, taking into account these key debates and Egyptian circumstances to answer the question posed here.

Part 1

A Brief Economic Overview of Egypt
In the 1950s and 1960s, Egypt was a country with relatively egalitarian economic guarantees for its population. In 2011, it was described by Salwa Ismail of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) as a ‘private estate’ where around one-thousand families reign supreme in its economic and social life.[2] How this stark transformation occurred – from a ‘socialistic’ economy to a ‘quintessential neoliberal state’[3] – will be the focus of this section. This will set the scene for the whole study and show that it was exactly the economic policies that created this “private estate” that propelled the Egyptian Revolution forward.

After Gamal Abdel Nasser took power leading on from a 1952 coup, a certain social contract was put in place in Egypt. In return for free education, employment in a growing public sector, housing, health care[4] and modest land reform,[5] the population of Egypt was forced to give up any pretensions of political organisation or criticism. As Hazem Kandil, an Egyptian sociologist, noted ‘people understood that they were trading their political rights for social welfare’. However, from the mid-1970s, with the “opening” of the economy to the market under Nasser’s successor Anwar Sadat, and culminating in the new millennium, this social contract and the “tacit agreement” it enshrined were dismantled. Believing the population had been “tamed” through the abuses of the huge police and state security apparatuses – increasingly acting through plain-clothed proxies – the ruling elite took its chance for self-enrichment, described as ‘plunder, on a grand scale’. This was made possible by a faction in the ruling party comprised of monopoly capitalists and neoliberal intellectuals.[8] Instead of the “selective” repression of the Nasser years, repression became much more arbitrary, with harassment and abuse ‘for no political reason, simply for purposes of extortion’. Under Sadat and increasingly under Hosni Mubarak, his now deposed successor, the Egyptian system was repressive to nearly all and without even the social welfare policies which had characterised the country under Nasser.

What economic policies did the pro-business clique in the Egyptian government pursue? In the words of Salwa Ismail:

Under sweeping privatisation policies, they appropriated profitable public enterprises and vast areas of state-owned lands. A small group of businessmen seized public assets and acquired monopoly positions in strategic commodity markets such as iron and steel, cement and wood. While crony capitalism flourished, local industries that were once the backbone of the economy were left to decline … Additionally, public social services underwent masked privatisation, taking health and education beyond the reach of vast segments of the population.[10]

In the period from 1996 to 1999 alone, ‘at least some 30 profitable public companies a year’ were sold.[11] Other policies included halving corporate tax rates to 20 percent, which were still rarely paid, while taxes for most people, notably on housing, increased greatly.[12] At the same time, the progressive taxation of the country was replaced by a single regressive tax.[13] Furthermore, in 2010, after protests calling for an increase of the minimum wage, the government decreed that less than $100 a month was “sufficient”, while evidence shows that even those who are employed on such wages live in poverty.[14] All of this occurred during a period of increasing food and utilities prices and flourishing corruption[15] with 40 percent of people living on less than $2 a day and with extremely high unemployment particularly affecting the young and educated.[16] On top of this was the prodigious involvement of international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, whose recommendations were responsible in part, both directly and indirectly, for such economic policies and the wider macroeconomic trajectory of Egypt.[17] It was in this socio-economic environment that the Egyptian Revolution erupted.

Causes of the Egyptian Revolution

The “spark” for the Tunisian Revolution, that was largely inspirational in Egypt and the region generally, is very demonstrative of the dual action of economic deprivation and political repression in the region. Mohamed Bouazizi, an unemployed fruit and vegetable seller in Tunisia, had his produce confiscated by authorities and responded with the shocking protest of setting himself on fire in front of the local government office. ‘How do you expect me to make a living?’, he reportedly exclaimed,[18] Bouazizi, an “everyman” example of the problems plaguing the region, was driven on one hand by his economic deprivation, and on the other by the abuse he suffered at the hands of the authorities who took away his only source of income. Similar incidents all over the region, including Egypt, were
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driven by similar economic ‘woes’. [19] Most importantly, such incidents roused people and resulted in widespread protesting. [20]

One of the defining slogans of the Egyptian Revolution is the chant of ‘bread, freedom and social justice’. [21] In giving examples of the interplay and relative importance of these economic and democratic demands, opinion polls conducted in Egypt offer valuable insights. A poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) showed that economic grievances rated highest in people’s minds. For example, while 63 percent of people cited ‘Unemployment’ (the most of any choice) and 30 percent cited ‘Poverty’ as the biggest problem facing Egypt, the lack of ‘Democracy’ and ‘Free Elections’ were only cited by 6 percent each. [22] A Pew Research Center poll also saw economic aspirations put ahead of democratic demands finding that ‘More Egyptians say that improved economic conditions (82%) and a fair judiciary (79%) are very important than say that about honest, multiparty elections (55%).’ [23] It also noted that more people would opt for a strong economy (49%) over a good democracy (47%), with high income groups prioritising a good democracy (58%), and those of middle and low income preferring a strong economy (53% in both cases). Only 39 percent of those with low incomes preferred a good democracy. [24] Possible reasons for these outcomes will be discussed later. A more recent Pew poll replicates these trends, with 81% of people considering ‘improved economic conditions’ as the ‘biggest concern’ and ‘top priority’. [25]

This duality of motivations is further demonstrated in a report by the Arab Institute for Human Rights and the Arab NGO Network for Development. The report noted that the desire to build a socio-economic system based on ‘dignity, liberty and equity … was the main demand of protesters in the entire region and what lead them to this profound change’. [26] Soumaya Ghannoushi, a researcher at SOAS, agreed, declaring that people in the region are ‘not only rebelling against an internationally backed political authoritarianism’ but the economic model they inhabit. [27] Finally, Kandil saw the basis of the ‘whole movement’ in Egypt ‘in the scale of economic exploitation and plunder, and in the extent of arbitrary molestation and repression’ by the state. [28]

In addition to this, the Egyptian Revolution can be added to the burgeoning list of anti-neoliberal movements around the world, and it has the potential to become the most significant, especially because it has occurred in the most populous Arab state. As Oxford University Professor Walter Armbrust states, ‘Egypt and Tunisia are the first nations to carry out successful revolutions against neoliberal regimes’, and the failure of neoliberalism in Egypt was one of the ‘prime’ motivations for people to pour out onto the streets. [29] Indeed, the deposed Mubarak regime seems to have been keenly aware of the importance of its neoliberal agenda in fuelling the uprising because ‘[i]n his first effort to quell unrest, Mubarak fired the ministers best known for developing the free-market agenda’ – amongst them the neoliberal intellectuals pervasive in the government [30] and those who were considered pro-business. Mubarak also responded by increasing state sector salaries, albeit too late. [31] After all, the calls for the ousting of the regime were largely driven by the associations it had with the marketisation of Egyptian society and dropping living standards alongside police and state abuses. In another example, ‘[t]he chants, songs, and poetry performed in [Tahrir Square]’, Armbrust continues, ‘always contained an element of anger against haramiyya (thieves) who benefited from regime corruption’. [32]

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the dual action that underpinned the Egyptian Revolution is the combination of economic deprivation and state abuse, with economic deprivation arguably the prime causal factor. Now that we have briefly examined the driving forces and grievances behind the Egyptian Revolution, the next section will show how these are being translated into concrete demands for economic reform.

What Kind of Reform?

The Arab Media Influence Report – AMIR 2011: Social Media & the Arab Spring, commissioned by the Dubai based News Group International, offers unique insights into the economic demands being put forward and discussed in the Arab World. Through an analysis of over ten million conversations a day on social media sites [33] such as Facebook and Twitter, it depicts trends in the thinking of the Arab populations on political and economic issues. It observed that ‘70% of online conversations directly called for a larger economic role by the government’, focusing on job creation, salary increases, food subsidies and public healthcare. It also noted that the prevalence of these demands had increased between January and February 2011 at rates of between 21 to 63 percent, [34] coinciding
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with the climactic ousting of Mubarak in Egypt. The study went as far as describing these trends as what it calls ‘Neo-Socialism’, with people calling for a larger public role in the economy and business, an increase in government jobs and subsidies, wide opposition to privatisation and, in Egypt, calls for nationalisations, sometimes from workforces themselves.[35]

Furthermore, a Gallup poll showed that ‘Egyptians are apprehensive about possible U.S. interference in their political affairs’, such as U.S. financing of political groups within Egypt and the ‘discomfort’ in accepting financial aid from the U.S., despite growing need.[36] Examples of this have been calls for ‘economic sovereignty’[37] and the ‘pressure of public opinion’ against accepting an IMF loan.[38]

Overall, Egyptians have displayed a great optimism about their economic future, with 80 percent expecting their financial situation to improve.[39] This could belie an enthusiasm for economic reform now that a line has been drawn between the corrupt Mubarak regime, and its economic ideals, and Egypt’s future. Furthermore, the calls for greater public sector involvement in the economy can be construed as anti-neoliberal, as the basis of neoliberalism is the culling of the state’s role in the provision of services.

Part 2
Theoretical Background

Having now established that progressive, anti-neoliberal economic policies are demanded in Egypt, alongside well-documented democratic demands, it is prudent to examine the links between democracy, economic redistribution and equality before we can answer the question posed by this study. To accomplish this task, this section will examine whether democracy is linked to greater economic equality and wealth redistribution, whether there are instead basic economic requirements for a functioning democracy and what other factors impact the ability to achieve economic equitability. Here, a critical examination of the main arguments of this debate will be given through an analysis of three demonstrative academic studies and reports on the subject.

One common argument is that democracy, economic development and income equalisation are inextricably linked.[40] This argument can be summed up by the Democracy and Changes in Income Inequality (hereafter DCII) study carried out at Southern Illinois University. It argues, through an examination of Human Development Index[41] data over time, that democracies, in comparison with authoritarian regimes, have been more able to reduce income inequality. This effect, it argues, is possibly due to the fact that democracies are ‘more likely to enact policies beneficial to low income groups’.[42] Elsewhere, the study adds that elites in political dictatorships often increase their wealth to the detriment of those with lower income.[43]

Another major argument is that economic equality is a requirement for a healthy, functioning democracy. This argument is put forward by the Poverty, Inequality and Democracy (hereafter PID) conference report compiled with the sponsorship of the United Nations Democracy Fund. This study focuses more on the economic requirements for democracy and concludes that high levels of poverty and inequality are the most important factors in the performance of a democracy, and that tackling these issues is crucial for its quality and sustainability.[44] Although the report notes that democratic competition can introduce incentives for politicians to push for wealth redistribution in the attempt to advance their electability, it notes that, when using the measurement of Gini coefficients,[45] the majority of democracies have seen income inequality remain static or even increase over time.[46] The report concludes that:

High levels of poverty and inequality not only lower the quality of democracy, but may pave the way for the emergence of authoritarian populists and democratic backsliding. Therefore, addressing the social question, which warrants attention in its own right, is critical to the sustainability and quality of democracy.[47]

The final major argument demonstrates that there are other factors besides the interplay between democracy and income equality which need to be added to the debate. This is the argument advanced by the oft-cited World Bank report Democracy and Income Inequality: An Empirical Analysis (hereafter DII:EA). In an attempt to study the effect of democracy on income inequality, it aimed to debunk the argument that democracy and inequality are related.[48]
It concludes that ‘the effect of democracy on inequality is negative but very weak’ and that after a ‘one-year lag’ the effect of democracy on equality almost vanishes.[49] Instead, it notes, most importantly, the impact of ideology on inequality. Using the example of how democratisation in Eastern Europe actually increased inequality (due, we could add, to the introduction of radical free market reform), the study notes the importance of the ruling political ideology of the state and its leaders on equality. The former Eastern Bloc was ruled under egalitarian economic principles and a political culture that did not approve of major differences in income. The outcome of this was economic policies generally favouring more equitable income distribution.[50] In essence, the prevailing ideology, and not the democratic credentials, of these states was the main factor that influenced their level of economic equality in the sense that it impacted the kind of economic policies they enacted.

To complement this point, examples of societies with well established democratic systems yet with serious and increasing inequality are not difficult to find. For example, the United States, with its ideology of competitive individualism and social mobility, allows high inequality to exist as something morally justifiable. In other words, the dominant political ideology in a state, or the ideological preferences of its decision-makers towards equality and wealth redistribution, are much more important than whether the system is democratic or not.

Analysis and Comment

So far, we have seen the weak or even negative link between democracy, equality and wealth redistribution. Now, I will use some insights and arguments gained from these studies to make three further arguments for why democracy, in the sense of “free and fair elections”, will not guarantee that the demands of the Egyptian Revolution will be met. These arguments are centred around the issue of “participation” in democracy in economically unequal societies, the “inadequacy” of national democracies in the context of a globalised economy, and the political realities in Egypt today.

A) Participation in Democracy

The ability to participate in a democracy, that is, to have the time and economic security to engage in the formation of public policy either directly or indirectly, is critical in the Egyptian context of a deeply unequal society. As we see in Egypt, ‘[t]here is still rather little [political] pressure coming from below. Most workers are still essentially concerned with their daily needs—pay, holidays, working conditions—with very few overarching political demands so far’.[51] Moreover, as the IRI poll notes, 41 percent of Egyptians think that the dire statement ‘I have trouble feeding myself and my family and buying even the most essential things for survival’ best describes their economic situation.[52] To expect enthusiastic and sustained political participation from these people is, unfortunately, unrealistic. As Karl Marx noted, in the words of David Harvey, ‘an empty stomach [is] not conductive to freedom’.[53] In essence, the possession of rights, such as free and fair elections, cannot in themselves guarantee the ability to utilise them. These arguments go some way to explain why educated youth and the professional classes were often the most actively involved in the Egyptian Revolution’s early stages. After all, they are the ones with the relative economic security to enable their active engagement with politics. Elsewhere, we have seen the lack of mobilisation from the lowest classes of slum dwellers who make up a fifth of Egypt’s population, and the peasantry.[54] As Armbrust notes, ‘revolutions are never carried out by the poorest of the poor’.[55] This might negate the point brought up in the studies we have looked at; that democratic competition introduces incentives for politicians to redistribute wealth as their electability depends on such policies. However, the lack of participation by the lowest classes in Egyptian political life could continue post-democratisation, when chasing the votes of these groups would be politically unrewarding. There is, in effect, little for a politician to gain in trying to appeal to groups which are politically disengaged and are unlikely to vote. With unfortunate irony, those who would most benefit from political moves to improve their conditions are prevented by those same conditions from affecting political outcomes. This problem is demonstrated aptly in the well established democracies of the United States and the United Kingdom where the political battleground is increasingly the middle class,[56] with the lower classes largely absent from mainstream political discourse. This is why, as the PID report notes, answering the “social question” is so important for a democracy to function, and why improving the economic conditions of the working and lower classes of Egypt becomes necessary both in principle, and to allow the participation in, and utilisation of, new found democratic rights.
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On top of this, we cannot expect that the introduction of greater levels of democracy will solve the problem of low participation. Democracy, as the PID and DII:EA studies showed, does not necessarily lead to greater economic equality and redistribution, and thereby cannot create the economic conditions that are a prerequisite for greater participation. Instead, redistributive economic policies must be carried out. However, this remains a popular argument. In a May 2011 speech to the UK Parliament, President Obama declared that the two nations should help Tunisia and Egypt ‘demonstrate that freedom brings prosperity’. However, as this piece has shown, this notion lacks credence.

Overall, some of those with economic security in Egypt may be satisfied with democratic reform alone, as we have seen, the Pew poll showed that those with high incomes in Egypt have a preference for a good democracy over a strong economy. Yet, those struggling economically, who instead favour a strong economy, may be more disappointed. As we have seen, the defining slogan of the Egyptian Revolution is ‘bread, freedom and social justice’. These desires cannot be separated or treated individually. All must be present for any other to be achievable. Yet, even then, can a democratic political system hold to account the global economic forces Egypt, as any country, is subject to?

B) Inadequacy of National Democracies

Another issue, which can be applied globally but also needs to be looked at in the Egyptian context, is the inadequacy of national democracy in an increasingly globalised world economy. As Aberystwyth University Professor Ian Clark notes:

There may be little point in holding national and local politicians accountable through elections if these politicians remain relatively powerless to exercise influence over global corporations, global technology, global environmental changes, or the global financial system.

In Egypt’s heavily privatised economy, many economic decisions are taken away from the jurisdiction of a national democratic framework. It can easily be argued that the interests of shareholders do not correspond to those of the majority of Egyptian citizens, 69 percent of whom disapprove of the business community in the country. As B. C. Smith notes, while ‘the more strident forms of authoritarianism’ may have disappeared from some nations in the developing world, ‘market forces have effectively countered the formal political rights of the non-propertied classes’. This could mean that even if political authoritarianism is removed in Egypt, the prominence of market forces in neoliberal economies could mean that many democratic gains for the majority would be overridden by the undemocratic and unaccountable operation of big business.

Elsewhere, international financial institutions such as the IMF, whose democratic credentials Clark questions, have had prodigious involvement in Egypt. According to Samer Shehata, such institutions were central in pushing the Egyptian government into the neoliberal economic policies pursued under Sadat and Mubarak, with catastrophic results. Yet, Egyptian politics are indeed relatively powerless in holding this institution to account, after all, with Egypt only commanding a tiny fraction of influence in the organisation. Even a democratic Egypt, where the population will have an input on policy towards the IMF through their representatives, will not be able to tackle and reform these institutions because of the miniscule influence Egypt and other developing countries have within them.

Moreover, the interim government led by Field Marshall Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) which ruled Egypt since Mubarak stepped down on 11th February 2011 until June 2012, openly proposed the continuation of pre-revolutionary economic policies in Egypt, promising to ‘resolve obstacles to investment in the country following the overthrow of former president Hosni Mubarak’. This is in effect a euphemism for a continuation of the neoliberal policies of the previous regime. Furthermore, the military in Egypt has sprawling economic interests. Up to 40 percent of Egypt’s economy is controlled by the military, which specialises in anything from bottled water and restaurants to property and football teams. As Robert Springborg of Egypt’s Naval Postgraduate School noted, protecting its businesses from scrutiny and accountability is a red line the military will draw, likely making economic reform difficult. There is a feeling in Egypt that although the SCAF has relinquished power formally, it will not countenance further challenges to its economic and political power, and has
made moves in this direction.

Furthermore, as Clark goes on to say:

It is very well for citizens to be represented in national electoral institutions, but what voice does this give them in controlling those very economic, social and cultural forces that cut across national borders, if their own governments do not have the capacity to deal with these?[67]

This could partly explain why the Egyptian people are demanding more public sector involvement in their country’s economy, favouring moves towards ‘economic sovereignty’ and showing a ‘growing appetite for nationalisation’.[68] Even if the complete ability to deal with these factors has become impossible for a national democracy in the modern world economy, greater public sector involvement can return meaningful amounts of control and accountability to the national level.

However, the G8’s response to the Arab Spring drawn up at its 2011 summit argued that the changes occurring in the region ‘have the potential to open the door to the kind of transformation that occurred in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall’, with the declaration going on to take a broadly pro-market and neoliberal approach.[69] These “transformations” had disastrous economic impacts in Eastern Europe, and as has been already discussed, led to starkly increased economic inequalities.[70] This hardly seems the appropriate direction for Egypt. Sharif Abdel Kouddous noted similar dynamics, with ‘the budgetary and fiscal proposals being considered to secure external financial assistance [in Egypt] are geared more towards furthering Mubarak-era policies than to promoting social justice’. [71] All of this occurs at a time when most Egyptians (57%) oppose aid from the international financial institutions.[72] The IMF, Abdel Kouddous continues, is poised to implement a structural adjustment programme in Egypt and that overall, ‘what is becoming clear is that signs point to a continuation and deepening of many of the same policies that stirred up last year’s revolt’. [73]

Finally, as the DII:EA study notes, what is more important are the policy choices, driven by the ideology of a government, as opposed to simply a country’s level of democracy. As one academic summarised, ‘democracies by themselves do not remove poverty; economic strategies do’, [74] and we may add that particular economic strategies perform better than others. What is needed in Egypt are thus specific economic policies which accurately represent the demands of the “street”. However, as will be examined now, there are numerous obstacles to economic reform being carried out in Egypt.

C) Egyptian Political Realities

We can state that the culmination of the demands of the revolution, as analysed in this study, stand in the secular left of the political spectrum: a greater role for the public sector, increased wages, nationalisation and many others. As Mohamed Elmeshad, writing for the Egypt Independent, states, ‘social justice is a main demand of the revolution and a hallmark of leftist politics’. [75] The secular left in Egypt is therefore arguably the most representative of these demands. Yet, it faces many more obstacles than its older, more organised and better financed rivals such as the Muslim Brotherhood. As an Egyptian academic noted, ‘[l]eftist groups are not as well funded as other groups. This has been a major stumbling block’. [76] Bahaa Shaaban, a leader in the Egyptian Socialist Party portrayed a similar sentiment, noting that the lack of a wealthy membership disadvantages their party.[77] Depending solely on membership dues is a ‘tall order’ for progressive and nationalist parties.[78] Elmeshad continued, saying that ‘lack of funding’, on the part of progressive parties, ‘also meant an inability to achieve any media presence in the form of a party paper or establish local headquarters in a majority of governorates – both necessities of modern Egyptian political maneuverability’. [79] For example, although before parliamentary elections the SCAF has exempted the liberal Al-Adl party, and other youth parties from the cost of publishing their membership lists and party programmes in two major newspapers – a legal requirement, which can cost up to around $60,000[80] – this does not appear to have been extended to any left-leaning party. Another limitation, which uniquely affects the left, is the Egyptian Political Parties Law which stipulates that no party can be based on ‘class’, putting question marks over the left’s legal viability. As a founding member of the Democratic Labor Party said, ‘[a]ll our core we fight for the rights of one strata of society, the poor, but nowhere in the world does that count as a reason to disqualify a political party, except
The results of Egypt’s first free parliamentary elections, held between 28th November 2011 and 11th January 2012, are therefore not surprising. These elections propelled the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party to dominance with 47 percent of the vote, followed by the hard-line Salafist Nour party with 24 percent. Liberal and reformist parties, on the other hand, floundered, with the liberal New Wafd and secular Egyptian Bloc garnering less than 8 and 6 percent of the vote respectively. Youth and progressive parties fared even worse. For example, the Revolution Continues Alliance only managed to garner around 2 percent of seats in the new parliament. As Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mohamed ElBaradei stated, youth – having failed to unify and form ‘one essential critical mass’ – were ‘decimated’ in the elections. On 23rd and 24th of May 2012, Egypt experienced its first relatively free and competitive presidential election. The run-off on 16th and 17th of June between Mohamed Morsi, the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party and Ahmed Shafiq, former commander of the air force who briefly served as Prime Minister under Mubarak, resulted in a victory for Morsi. For this study then, the proposed economic policies of Morsi become important. To what extent can Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood answer the calls for social justice that form the basis of the revolution?

Morsi and the Freedom and Justice Party are committed to a ‘free-market economy with a strong private sector’ and emulating the Turkish economic model. Morsi has outlined the policy of limiting the state’s role. Tellingly, many members of the Muslim Brotherhood have large business interests and Hassan Malek, one of its leading financiers and business experts, has stated that further enabling the private sector is the solution to Egypt’s struggling economy. ‘We want to attract as much foreign investment as possible… This needs a big role for the private sector’, Malek has said. Along these lines, the government has already taken many pro-market measures, including dropping charges on investors who appropriated state-owned land under the former regime, as long as they pay its market price, and appealing court rulings that would have renationalised three private companies. All this is exacerbated by a situation in which international financial institutions are recommending the continuation and expansion of neoliberal policies in Egypt. Overall, it is very unlikely that the demand for social justice will be safe in the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party, or the new president, Mohamed Morsi.

Furthermore, the extent of the Muslim Brotherhood’s success should not be as shocking as it is to many Western commentators. The Muslim Brotherhood, which was formed in 1928, has an immeasurable organisational advantage over other parties in Egypt. Although driven underground in the Nasser era, it continued to operate and the decimation of social services, beginning with Sadat, created “gaps” in the provision of basic services that the Islamists were able to fill, gaining widespread support and popular legitimacy in the process. Egypt’s neoliberal economic policies thus opened up a space for the Muslim Brotherhood, which it has now capitalised upon. Youth and many progressive parties, in contrast, were only in existence for two months before parliamentary elections. Overall, we can see that lack of funding and legal obstacles uniquely affect youth and progressive parties in Egypt, even though, as Elmeshad noted, the prominent demands for social justice are a “hallmark” of the policies of these organisations. The outcome for Egypt is thus a stark one, a modest democratisation which has allowed relatively free national elections, while the socio-economic causes of the revolution do not appear to be addressed. If anything, a deepening of neoliberal policy appears likely.

Conclusion

In the global environment of neoliberalism the Arab revolutions entered, spontaneous popular revolts against these policies were catalysed by the socio-economic conditions and political repression of their respective states. To counter the prevailing narrative’s undue focus on democratic reform, we have examined the demands of the revolution and the link between equality, wealth redistribution and democracy, and concluded that democracy in itself does not necessarily guarantee the redistribution of wealth, or a decrease of inequality within a country. In other words, as the DII:EA study noted, whether a state is democratic or not does not necessarily correspond to its economic equality and level of wealth redistribution. However, as the PID report pointed out, whether a state carries out equalising and redistributive economic policies does impact on the quality and sustainability of its democracy. In other words, economic reform must presuppose, or at least coincide with, any meaningful democratisation to help foster
participation, a hallmark of democratic politics.[94] Democratic reform alone would not tackle the issues of participation, namely the socio-economic deprivation that makes engagement with democracy impossible for many, or overcome all of the limitations a national democracy faces in the global economy. Tackling socio-economic issues such as poverty and inequality is not only desirable in principle, but it is actively required for the functioning of Egypt’s newly developing democracy. Thus, improving socio-economic conditions in Egypt is the most practical and long-term answer to the Egyptian Revolution. On the one hand, it will satisfy the socio-economic demands of the protestors, and, on the other, it will create the conditions for them to engage with whatever democracy arises in the country and work towards replacing, or at least regulating, the influence of global capital and international financial institutions. In essence, it will work towards solving both the problems of Egyptian social life, which have driven the revolution. Yet, this is not to be sceptical of democracy as a good in and of itself. As the Eastern Bloc example has also convincingly shown, egalitarian income distribution and generous social welfare is vapid without democratic and personal freedoms.

Finally, there is too much emphasis in Western discourse on simply arriving at democracy in a country by whatever means, and thus allowing all other social and economic issues to be neatly resolved. This, however, has been proven to be a seriously lacking hypothesis from experiences in Russia and Eastern Europe, Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. The deposing of the dictator Mubarak seems to be only an early, though very significant, victory in what promises to be a long process. With discontent growing with the slow pace of reform and Tahrir Square being prominently reoccupied on several occasions, the Egyptian people have shown that they are willing to return to the streets if their demands are not met.[95] However, a post-communist style disillusionment is also possible, if the new political rights and elections do not deliver significant improvements in quality of life. As Perry Anderson notes, without freedom being consciously ‘reconnected’ to equality, the Arab Spring could easily slip into a ‘parliamentarized version of the old order’, [96] that is formally democratic but in reality still deeply unequal.


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[22] These figures are the total mentions of these issues after given the choice of first, second and third mention. Unemployment also has the highest percentages of first (37%) and second (17%) mentions. The International Republican Institute (IRI), ‘Egyptian Public Opinion Survey, April 14 – April 27, 2011’ (Williams and Associates, 2011), p. 11. Available at http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2011%20June%20%20Survey%20of%20Egyptian%20Public%20Opinion,%20April%202011.pdf (Accessed 30 July 2012).
[26] Arab Institute for Human Rights and Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), ‘Human Rights under the Democratic Changes and Equitable Development: Lessons of the Popular Tunisian Revolution and the
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[29] Armbrust, ‘A revolution against neoliberalism?’


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/multi0page.pdf (Accessed 5 May 2011).

[41] Human Development Index is a comparative statistical measure of life expectancy, literacy, education, and standards of living of a country.


[45] The Gini coefficient is a statistical measure of inequality, often based on wealth and income, that has been widely applied.


[54] Kandil, ‘Revolt in Egypt’, pp.24-27


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[60] Smith, B. C. Understanding Third World Politics (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 1996), p. 79.


[70] Jones, ‘Is the G8 supporting or undermining’.


[76] Elmeshad, ‘Egypt’s left’.

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[77] Bahaa Shaaban cited in Elmeshad, ‘Egypt’s left’.


[79] Elmeshad, ‘Egypt’s left’.


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[93] Cited in Telegraph 'Egyptian youth 'decimated' in parliamentary elections'.


[95] See, for example, Democracy Now!, ‘Egyptians Fill Tahrir Square for a ‘Second Day of Rage’: “We Have Demands that Haven’t Been Met Yet”’. Democracy Now! (online), 1 June 2011. Available at http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2011/6/1/egyptians_fill_tahrir_square_for_a_second_day_of_rage_we_have_demands_that_havent_been_met_yet (Accessed 30 July 2012).


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